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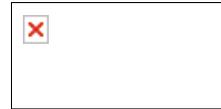
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SUN NEWS **Canada**

Mon, February 25, 2008



Demons from St. Albert's Indian Residential School
'Someone was always being hit for something'

By **ANDREW HANON**

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For years, Joe Courtoreille refused to go into St. Albert.

"I just couldn't come through on that road," he says. "Too many bad memories. I'd always have to go around."

Just thinking about the nine years he spent "imprisoned" at St. Albert's Indian Residential School used to anger Courtoreille.

"It was awful," he says, "just like jail."

He checks himself, then adds: "No. Jail is more better."

Courtoreille says the children were virtual slaves in the service of the Catholic Church and sexual playthings for the school's staff.

Once, as a young teenager, he was forced by a nun to masturbate her with a bottle.

When he was nine, a priest ordered Courtoreille into his private room and made the boy perform sexual acts on him. If he refused, the priest warned, he'd beat him.

Almost every night for two or three more years, the priest would select one of the boys around Courtoreille's age. Each night he'd pray it wasn't his turn.

"That's the way it was," the 77-year-old says, sipping coffee and smoking a cigarette in his apartment in an Edmonton seniors' home.

"The priests would abuse the younger boys and nuns would abuse the older ones."

There were two native residential schools in St. Albert. The Edmonton Indian Residential School, run by the Presbyterian and later the United Church, was on the



Joe Courtoreille spent nine years "imprisoned" at St. Albert's Indian Residential School. (Perry Mah/Sun)

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northeast corner of the community.

Courtoreille attended the Catholic-run St. Albert's Indian Residential School on a massive acreage now occupied by the Sturgeon hospital on Highway 2. It was only open from the late 1930s to about 1950.

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He was eight when the local Indian agent showed up at the Alexander reserve 50 km northwest of Edmonton, to take his brother and two sisters to the school.

"He told my grandparents (who raised them) that if they didn't let us go, they could be charged, so they had no choice."

Once at the school, all boys and girls were segregated and forbidden to speak to each other.

SUNshine Girl



"I wasn't allowed to talk to my sisters, even if we were in the same class," Courtoreille recalls. "We'd have to pass notes."

Every day began at 5 a.m. with a church service. After that they spent half the day working on the farm, which Courtoreille says he later learned supplied area Catholic hospitals with food.

"I figure we made a lot of money for the priests," he says. "In the springtime, the boys 13 and older worked pretty much all day on the farm."

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Courtoreille remembers being taught to make the sign of the cross before milking each cow.

"I figure that's where the saying 'holy cow' comes from," he says, laughing.

Afternoons were spent in the classroom, where a teacher worked at the front and a nun stood vigil in the back, using a stick to hit anyone who didn't pay attention to their lessons.

Bedtime for the younger kids was 7 p.m. Once they were tucked in, he says, no one was allowed to get up, for any reason.

Kids who wet their beds would have their faces rubbed in the wet sheets, like disobedient puppies, followed by a strapping.

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"Someone was always being hit for something," he recalls. "All of us kids, we'd try so hard to be perfect, but we were just kids. You can't do everything right all the time."

He shows a scar on his scalp, a souvenir from the time he refused a nun's order to clean the outside of the second-floor windows by crawling out on the ledge.

"I was scared," he says. "I didn't want to fall. She said I had to, or else. She got so mad she hit me with a stick."

His grandparents would visit on weekends and the children got to go home for two months in the summer, but they never told anyone about what was really going on.

"We were scared," he says.

"We didn't talk about it for a long, long time."

To this day, the memories of residential school come back to haunt him.

"Sometimes it really bothers me," he says. "I used to figure alcohol would cure that feeling. It did for a while, but then things just got worse. I used to be so angry, and sometimes I didn't even know why."

He reached a turning point in 1968, when he drank moonshine and went permanently blind.

Realizing that he was killing himself, Courtoreille quit drinking and started trying to deal with the demons that haunted him.

"For years we wouldn't talk about what went on in there, now it's good that our people are more open about it," he says.

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